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ABSTRACT

This report contains information obtained from approximately 7 hours of interviews conducted with 11 people who had worked with the school psychologist hired by the Lamoille South Supervisory Union Board of Directors (comprising school board members from the towns of Elmore, Morristown, and Stowe, Vermont) to address student problems. Student problems related to problems of family and peer relationships are considered, and the changing nature of parent-child relationships as more and more families include two employed parents is discussed. Changing family structures resulting from divorce and/or remarriage are examined. It is noted that the changes in family life have forced schools to take on a more parental role that they had in the past. The increasing demand for school psychological services in these Vermont towns is reviewed. The effect on the need for school psychological services of the enactment of Vermont State Act 230, which calls for changes in the way students with special learning problems are educated, is discussed. The majority of the report presents direct quotes from school personnel on the contributions made to their schools by the school psychologist. (NB)

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"In Their Own Words"

Comments, Observations, and Reflections on Working with a School Psychologist

Jerry Tillotson
EDU 508A
Adolescent Development
May 6, 1993

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J. Tillotson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

PREFACE

All I knew before I started talking to the key people from whom I would get the information for this project was that I wanted it to be more than just my written interpretation of the perspectives of others. I knew what I wanted to ask and I knew what I wanted to find out. What I had yet to establish was the form it would take.

Out of necessity, I decided to use a tape recorder. In eight years as a journalist, the only time I had allowed myself to use one was when I had broken my writing hand. The rule of thumb among industry purists is that while they are convenient, reliance on a tape recorder makes you a passive listener as opposed to an active interviewer. This time, however, there seemed to be no other way out. I would have to conduct my interviews on my lunch hour from work and I did not wish to take any more time than necessary away from the busy people I would have to talk to. Small amounts of time would have to be used to the utmost efficiency. A tape recorder would make that possible.

Nevertheless, using a tape recorder still bothered me. I guess as a way to atone for my "sin" I decided to transcribe the interviews word for word. I rationalized that in the process I would become more familiar with the information that I had been given plus I would have at my fingertips pages I could flip through to find what I needed as I wrote.

I interviewed eleven people, sometimes individually, sometimes in small groups, for a total of seven hours. The amount of words that seven hours of conversation can generate is

incredible. For every hour of straight interview, it probably took me three hours to transcribe. When I was finished I had 52 single-spaced pages of excellent information with which to work. It was at that point I decided on the form my project would take.

Throughout the close, intimate transcription process I was struck by the quality of the responses. The speakers are dedicated people. There is genuine concern and passion in their voices. It is clear they understand and appreciate this great imperative, the intense need, facing modern students. Nothing better than their own words can represent the responsibility, dedication, and commitment they exhibit as professionals who work with kids.

What I have done is split the difference between straight interview copy and an expository report. Not wishing to tamper with ideal expression, I have used direct quotes extensively. Every word has been kept in context, but I have arranged what I was told in a pattern that best describes the history of the Morristown School District's school psychologist. I have used my own words to tie everything together.

In the process I have acquired a better understanding of this school system, a greater appreciation of its personnel, a more realistic understanding of the issues facing students today, and an intense awareness of what teachers encounter and need to deal with in contemporary classrooms. Every minute I spent on this project, conducting interviews, transcribing, writing, and arranging, was time extremely well spent.

Jerry Tillotson
May 2, 1993

In January of 1989 the Lamoille South Supervisory Union board of directors, comprising school board members from the towns of Elmore, Morristown, and Stowe, was meeting to set the budget for the upcoming fiscal year. Among the budget items discussed that evening, one in particular stands out. Superintendent Dr. Alice Angney informed the board that the number of students in emotional-behavioral crisis had reached a significant level. Guidance counselors of the respective schools, especially in Morristown, besides ever increasing special education and guidance needs, were being overburdened by issues that had nothing to do with student course selections, scholastic achievement, or getting into college. Dollars earmarked to fund conventional guidance counseling were being diverted to outside agencies that could provide appropriate psychological and mental health services for self-destructive students as well as those having trouble coping with what was going on at home. Because these services originated outside the school, there was difficulty in obtaining timely assistance to meet crises head on and in establishing a continuity in treatment and follow-up. Present staff, according to Angney, while doing the best they were trained to do, simply could not adequately deal with the intense needs that kids were bringing to school with them. All principals, special educators, and guidance personnel were in total agreement with the superintendent that something needed to be done.

To better meet the needs of students and to allow special needs and guidance staff to concentrate on issues more relevant

to their job descriptions and areas of expertise, Angney recommended, in agreement with all principals, guidance counselors, and special educators, adding the position of school psychologist to the upcoming year's budget. Fiscally conservative board members questioned the justification of the added expense in defense of the taxpayer. They argued that such services need to be provided by the family. Angney reminded them that the schools consistently found that most of the time, the family was indeed the problem. The supervisory union, she emphasized, in order to maximize its ability to meet the educational needs of all of its students could not afford to be without a school psychologist. A motion to add the position carried after a two-hour debate.

Now on the verge of completing its fourth school year, the position continues to have its critics, especially following the supervisory union board's action of December 1992 that expanded school psychology personnel by six-tenths of a position beginning in 1993-94. That means Morristown will have a psychologist full-time and Stowe will have one three days a week.

"What it gives us is an in-house response," explained Angney, LSSU's superintendent since 1985. "When we have a serious problem we have someone in-house that we can count on. Guidance counselors can count on him, teachers can count on him. It's a piece of that support system that it takes, particularly in today's inclusive environment, to support students so that education for them, and the other students as well, can be ongoing. Before we had an in-house school psychologist [Peoples

Academy director of guidance] Bob Rowe was almost burned out and at that point the position was added. He couldn't do it. I'm not saying he couldn't do what needed to be done. He couldn't respond to requests for a response in a crisis period. That was one of the reasons we looked for a school psychologist. Because Bob's expertise and total commitment couldn't do it. That's a good indicator for you that you've got to do something else. That was a key factor. We just didn't have the support staff for our students."

Rowe has been at Peoples Academy since the fall of 1967. Except for one year, he has been there ever since. It is in no way an exaggeration to state that Rowe is one of the most, if not the most, respected professionals in the school system, revered as much by the students as he is by his co-workers. His first concern is the welfare of each and every student. Ask anyone who has ever worked with him. If there were a single, definitive measure by which guidance counselors were evaluated, Bob Rowe would set the standard. That is what Superintendent Angney was referring to when she said that when it's apparent that Bob Rowe needs help to do his job, the school system needs help to do its job. Rowe is the first to admit when he needs help. Significant social changes have transformed the demands on his time.

"I can't begin to describe the difference that I feel in this job than when I first started here," declared Rowe. "What it is now compared to what it was back in the late sixties through the middle to late seventies is markedly different with just the number of kids that are coming through the door at eight

o'clock in the morning, whether they're going to be able to function that day."

Rowe said it's hard to pin students with emotional-behavioral needs down to anything typical. Such problems do not seem to strike any particular socioeconomic class or any particular type of family structure.

"It kind of runs the gamut, it seems," Rowe confided. "To give you an example of my last two days here, I spent two hours yesterday in meetings in a discussion on two youngsters whose living situation has all of a sudden just deteriorated because a particular program is ending. The funding isn't there. And the question is, 'Where are these two children going to live?' I went for another hour this morning on one of the same kids with SRS to discuss what's going to happen to this child in thirty days when he finds out he can't live any longer where he is. Just when you were standing out here waiting, two kids came in about another kid who they're concerned may be starving herself. An anorexia problem."

Joanne Harrison is also a guidance counselor at Peoples Academy. She has been working with Rowe since 1982. Harrison hasn't been around P.A. as long as the director of guidance has, but she feels she has seen many changes, too.

"Kids are growing up too fast," she added. "Behaviors that we used to deal with, drinking, for instance, we would deal with drinking, drunkenness, and kids with substance abuse as juniors and seniors. We're dealing with that now in the seventh and eighth grade. And over in the elementary school they're dealing

with that. I'd say one factor, if I had to pick one factor that causes more kids to be at risk in our school, it's alcohol and substance abuse in the home."

Quoting statistics, Harrison said Lamoille County is first in the state in binge drinking and third in the nation in the same category.

"That impacts on so many kids because it's the source of violence in the home as well," Harrison maintains. "Often times when there's drinking there's violence and abusiveness, whether it's verbal or physical."

One reason schools are compelled to provide more emotional-behavioral support to students, Rowe suggests, is because many of the same kids the school is serving today would have left school years ago.

"We're hanging on to them," Rowe stated proudly. "We've got a drop out rate in this school over the past ten years of right around three percent. Compare that with what we're hearing in the urban areas right now.

"In a lot of instances," Rowe continues, "what we deal with certainly is not by a proactive choice on the part of schools. We're forced to deal with things because kids walk through the door and say, 'Hey, I'm not going home tonight.' And you aren't able to say, 'Sorry, we don't deal with that here.'"

For the most part, evidence and experience point to change in family configuration as the primary factor that has forced schools to fill a tremendous void now vividly apparent in children's lives. Faculty, staff, and administration who deal

with Morristown school system students in grades five through twelve, responding to a recent survey, identified family relationships as the area from which most challenges that face students originate. One-third of the respondents ranked family as the number one source of concern for students while two-thirds placed it in the top three. Ninety-five percent placed family relationships in the top five.

The issue they ranked as the second most prolific source of problems and concerns is peer relationships. Twenty-seven percent ranked peer involvement as the most significant challenge facing students, with 54 percent placing it in the top three and 68 percent in the top five.

Respondents ranked issues involving alcohol as the third most challenging aspect. Alcohol made it to the third spot with just one first place selection and only three respondents cited it as the second most important issue. However, the same number of people, 68 percent, ranked alcohol in the top five as did those who selected peer relationships.

It is also significant to note that sixty-two percent of those surveyed said that between a quarter and a half of their students experience a more stable environment at school than they do at home. Add to that those who selected the fifty to seventy-five percent range and you have seventy-six percent of the teachers perceiving that one-quarter to three-quarters of their students have less stable environments at home as opposed to school.

But Harrison pointed out that beyond transformations in family structure, the changes in, and sometimes the disappearance of, artificial support structures have been contributory as well.

"None of the institutions that used to be there for kids," she explained, "the church, scouts, certain clubs and organizations, kids today aren't involved in a lot of those things the way they used to be. We had a number of institutions that supported kids and families, but they aren't used by people today the way they once were. So the school is the only place where kids go, all kids go, for a chunk of time, and if we don't do it, it's not going to get done."

Peoples Academy principal Mike Mahoney suggests that legislation has changed the school's role in providing social-psychological services. Years ago, a student with the reputation as a troublemaker might have been the subject of a concerted effort among schools to spare one another the impending turmoil that student might bring.

"What's happened is that a lot of the fundamentally good laws to support kids and help them be successful causes us also to take the occasional youngster who is either mentally ill or unstable enough to place other kids at risk," remarked Mahoney, now in his third year as principal at P.A. "Even ten years ago, a youngster with that kind of a problem would have been held at the door and not allowed to enter that population. Now there are some fundamentally good laws to allow kids with some kind of a problem to enter the system and be educated. It forces us to work with kids with a number of ranges of disabilities."

Accepting the challenges that "fringe" youngsters bring to school has also brought about by a change in attitude among educators, according to eight-year Morristown Elementary School principal Otho Thompson. A heightened social consciousness, a much more caring approach in dealing with students, and an unwillingness of educators to allow students to accept themselves as failures also compel schools to meet the needs of students in more comprehensive ways.

"We're not as willing to write off a kid as we used to be," Thompson reflected. "We aren't as quick to say, 'If you don't meet my standards and my expectations, then you're out of here.' We're kind of flex with the situations and the circumstances and more responsive to kids' needs.

"I would say my sense of what our high school was ready to deal with was a lot narrower when I came to Morrisville than it is now. I think the elementary school had already started to make some moves in a direction where it broadened its mission. And I think now the high school is doing that beautifully. But when I first came to town, the high school saw its role as dealing with a pretty narrow group of kids. I think that the group it really supported were the college prep types who were playing the game by the rules. That's who Peoples Academy served. I think that's different now."

The "broadening of the mission," as has been pointed out, was not so much accepted by the schools as it was forced upon them, as Mahoney believes. This statement is in no way meant to minimize the sincerity of Thompson's thesis, which states that

contemporary educators view the total well-being of a child as a duty and a responsibility. It is only meant to illustrate how the schools came by this role. That is why Dorothy Reeve, Morristown Elementary's school nurse for the past eighteen years, took a brave stand this past Town Meeting Day in support of a full-time psychologist in the schools. After listening to a handful of taxpayers declare they didn't think it appropriate that their money be spent on providing such services, Reeve forcefully and articulately expressed that if the taxpayers do not want the schools to provide the students with psychological assistance, they would ultimately find themselves funding another community service that would. She told the gathering how she had kids in the elementary school who sometimes did not see an adult in their home for twenty-four hours because the adults were "pursuing their interests." Weeks later, however, she said those are extreme cases, but many, many students are living in seriously delicate situations. Along with her colleagues, Reeve agrees that most parents are doing the best they can under trying circumstances.

"I think most every parent wants the best for their child," she said. "But job situations, economics, that kind of thing make it difficult for them to parent well. They [opponents of school psychology] are from the era when things were dealt with at home and you had parents that were in the home and could be centered on their kids because that was their focal point. Whereas now I think families, the adults in the family, have their own issues to be contending with. A lot of times the kids'

issues get shoved aside because [the adults are] dealing with so much adult stuff themselves. They can't deal with their kids' stuff. I think that's the change. That's a societal change.

"We have to look at what's happened in Vermont over the last few years. There was a period of time when emotionally disturbed kids were not part of the school setting. They were being housed in specialized schools. With Act 230 and the homecoming piece that's been mandated in education, all those kids are now brought to the community school. As a result, the community school has had to absorb those kids and their continued emotional demands and needs. And that's a piece that wasn't present when [many of the community's taxpayers] went to school. They are present now. That's why the school psychologist and the other support staff have been hired. They're needed to support those kinds of kids in this environment. I think it's good that we've brought those kids out of the closet and into the school setting. But with it comes the need for more staff to do that. Some specialized staff to do that."

"And to add to that," noted Susan Titterton, "are all the sort of quote-unquote, regular kids. If we look at the demographics of that group of kids and look at what's happening, marriages breaking up, single parent families, reorganization of families, numbers of kids living in poverty, alcoholism, if we look at all of that and we look at stuff like people aren't going to church as much, extended families aren't around for a lot of folks to pick up some of the slack, the school winds up picking up some of the slack. But not just for the kids who have been

brought here from homecoming but also for a lot of the kids who twenty years ago looked different, perhaps, and now are just coming into school with these issues."

Titterton is one member of that support staff Reeve referred to hired as a consequence of homecoming. She has been employed by Morristown Elementary for six years. The first three of those years she was a half-time guidance counselor and a half-time coordinator of instructional support services, which then was a position that had just been created. The first year she did her best to stay within those respective half-time parameters. But the reality of responding to student crises forced her to realize that there was no way she could do both jobs. By her fourth year the school psychologist was in place and it was that year that she became Morristown Elementary's first full-time guidance counselor.

Titterton also emphasized that the change in family life has forced schools to take on a more parental role. Together, she and Reeve estimated that probably only one-third of Morristown Elementary students live with both of their birth parents.

"I know kids who can't even draw their family configuration," exclaimed Titterton. "It's so confusing. We say, 'Draw a picture of your family.' And they say, 'Well, just how do I do this? I have two families.' Kids lives are very complicated."

To illustrate an effect of family instability, Titterton related a story of a little girl who had just moved to a new place with her mom and her mom's boyfriend. The child couldn't

play outside because she was afraid of a strange dog that was chained in the front yard.

"That was a big deal for this one little girl," Titterton declared. "But her mom had been so busy with the move and everything that she didn't realize that she had to stop and pay attention until somehow, she called me and said, 'My daughter's been acting in such and such a way. Would you talk to her?' It's hard for families to figure out how to have that communication sometimes.

"And I think it all falls in the category of stress. Parents are under a lot of stress and the family is, too. Nobody functions as effectively when they're under a lot of stress. And part of the problem is that's true for the kids even as they come to school. It's true for the staff in school. The more pressure we put on the stuff that happens at school, the more you've got teachers who are saying, 'I've got to do this teaching but fifty percent of my teaching time is being taken up with these other issues. When you've got the adults in the school environment under stress, they may not respond to the kids as effectively as they could have otherwise. So, we've got to find some pressure valves in both settings to make it work well."

The impression should not be left that most nontraditionally structured families with school-age children are completely dysfunctional. Nor is dysfunctionalism in the home necessarily a prerequisite for social-behavioral need. One-parent and blended families can be, and many certainly are, quite strong and stable and provide positive atmospheres for childhood and adolescent

development. And there are instances when the children of families with both birth parents present find themselves needing help with emotional and behavioral issues.

"It seems to me that it cuts across all social classes," voiced Riki French, Morristown Elementary's coordinator of instructional support services. "There are kids whose parents both work and have a lot of money. Some of those kids have a lot of issues."

A traditionally structured family, for which it is quite likely that both parents need to obtain income, is in no way immune to the stresses that stem from the pressures of meeting family needs. Nor would it necessarily be any better equipped to avoid the consequences of scarce amounts of time for parent-child interaction. These factors can also have adverse impacts on the most secure of households.

"We think a lot of parents are doing the best they can," declared Rowe.

"I think a lot of them were not parented very well," Harrison suggested. "They don't know what good parenting is and they're doing what they think is best. I think there are an awful lot of parents who hardly know how to keep body and soul together as far as house, and food, and kids. I think there is a need for more parenting programs. We talk about having a parenting requirement here in school. Actually requiring kids to take parenting courses. Somewhere we need a systematic way to train, to teach people how to parent, what parenting is about. Right now we have an elective that kids can take and about ten,

twelve kids chose to take it. I think about three of my freshmen picked it up."

"There are some parents I wish we could help develop their skills," agrees Michael Hock, the supervisory union's coordinator of student services. "But I haven't seen anybody, those kinds of people who make you really angry, like sort of blatantly neglecting and not really caring about their kids. There does seem to be some lack of skill and knowledge."

Its population of 5,000 makes Morristown the biggest town in Lamoille County. Along with Stowe, it is the only community in the county to have a K-12 school system. Half its households have family incomes below the state median and 7.5 percent of its families are below the poverty level. Rental properties provide half the dwellings for all of Morristown's families. In recent years the employment rate in Morristown has grown less than it has in the rest of the county. Most of the jobs being lost are in the low wage sector.

"With the economic pressures on families," explained Angney, "even when there are two parents to do the feeding and clothing and the other things that need to be done to form with families, it increases the stress levels in family constellations. People don't have as much time and they are more exhausted than they used to be. There are more demands on their time. The result of that is children come to school with many more things bothering them and influencing their behavior. They need help dealing with that."

Harrison and Rowe learned in a course they are taking, entitled Youth at Risk, that only ten percent of current families in the United States involve a parent being home for the child after school. They also heard that parents spend less than three minutes a day on real communication with their children. Economic pressures, a decline in the presence of traditional community facilities that helped hold families together, and time constraints have worked to erode the strong sense of togetherness that once characterized families.

"People are not as tight with each other as they were," offered Thompson. "Parents who both work come home at the end of the day. They're zonked. They don't have a lot of time to spend on issues in the family. And if they do take them on, they do so impatiently and run out of steam real fast. Of all the places in the community that might support kids and families, school's probably the best place that's left. Some things that maybe happened in other parts of our community in years past I think are increasingly heading our way as a school. And one of the things is to help folks who are struggling with emotional issues or the stresses in their lives. They aren't hooked up with a church or an extended family or whatever other support systems that might have been present in years gone by. In our heads we're saying they're doing the best they can do under their circumstances, and go into it with that in our minds rather than, 'These people are irresponsible jerks and they need to be straightened out.' Because when we do that we are in an

adversarial relationship. We don't get anything out of it except a battle.

"Sometimes I wonder if I'm romanticizing years gone by," Thompson adds in retrospect. "Maybe there never was a 'good ole days.' But I kind of think that there were some differences. People had aunts and uncles and grandparents around. Not often were both parents at work all day long."

Thompson has also noticed that this shifting of family responsibilities to the schools has been accompanied by a phenomenon involving the ages of problem students. It supports the hypothesis that the onset of adolescence is occurring at a younger age.

"We're noticing something interesting in that our harder to manage youngsters are beginning to increasingly be the younger kids," the principal explained. "The question is, 'What is it that's so damaging to little kids these days out there?' Some of them come into school like they've been shot out of a cannon. From my recollection of what kindergartners were like ten or twelve years ago, I can't remember this ten years ago--[kindergartners] who are totally defiant. They are ready and willing to bite and kick their teachers. 'Time for us to come to the circle now.' 'NO!! I don't want to and you can't make me.'

"I think that some kids have discovered at a horribly early age that that kind of response to adults works for them. It gets them more attention or the only way they can get anybody to attend to them is to just be so completely obnoxious and destructive that the person who would just rather be taking a nap

at the end of a hard work day finally gets up out of their chair and deals with it. The kid gets more of a response from that behavior than from any other behavior that they've learned."

In recommending to the LSSU board that the school psychologist position be expanded, coordinator of student services Michael Hock, the administrator responsible for, among other things, special education, said that since the inception of the LSSU school psychologist program in 1989, the need for psychology services in the Morristown schools has grown beyond the capacity of one individual to provide those services.

"Morristown seems to be one of those towns in Vermont that's kind of a magnet for state placed kids through SRS," Hock illustrated. "This August [1992] alone we had five new kids placed in the community through SRS who were all labeled as having emotional-behavioral disabilities."

Hock presented the LSSU board with some compelling information regarding demands on local school psychology:

-It is quite common for our psychologist to spend an entire school day coordinating the academic, psychological, medical, and legal services for a single student.

-Over the past two years the number of LSSU students with significant emotional-behavioral disorders has more than doubled.

-Prior to the opening of school this year, more than 50 Peoples Academy students who might need some type of emotional support were identified by guidance counselors, special educators, and the school psychologist. The list included students who had experienced parents' divorce, death of a significant relative, drug/alcohol problems, truancy, and self-esteem problems related to academic difficulties.

-The number of students with emotional and behavioral problems served by Morristown's special education program has increased significantly over the past three years, due primarily to transfers into the district.

-The number of general education students with emotional and behavioral needs has also increased (students who are abused or have abuse in their families, students who have substance abuse problems, students who have recently experienced a divorce or death in their family, etc.)

-Many of the students served by our psychologist are best described as "high demand, intense" children. They present significant challenges and require an array of school and community services. It is not uncommon for the psychologist to invest all his time in the district working on a single student--observing, arranging for and conducting assessments, working with parents and teachers, arranging for and coordinating services, and working directly with the student.

-As the psychologist has become known in the community, the number of parents who seek him out for advice and support has increased.

-Because of limited time and the high demand for crisis intervention services, the psychologist has had little time to develop and implement prevention-related groups and services. Services of this type are a good investment for the district because they can help avoid more costly services required when the student moves to the crisis stage.

-Because of evolving state and local philosophy, students who present significant educational challenges are now being served in local schools and classrooms, rather than separate, out of district placements. The psychologist plays a pivotal role in making this possible but his time in the district is not sufficient to meet this increasing demand. An additional half-time position, by the way, is far less expensive than out of district placements and services.

The presence of such intense needs and demands does not mean that Morristown is an atypical Vermont community. In spite of the rather dismal appraisal of economic life in Morristown previously discussed, the community has a consistent history of supporting its school system. Voters have passed budget

increases for six consecutive years, often without a single question from the Town Meeting Day floor. Town Meeting 1993 was not one of those question-free years. Several voters questioned the need for, and were critical of the appropriateness of, the school providing such services. However, the school psychologist expansion was a supervisory union decision and not contingent upon popular vote. Had Morristown's school budget been defeated, the school psychologist position would have remained in place, but the message would have been loud and clear. The budget did pass by a semi-comfortable margin following some lengthy point-counterpoint on school psychology. The burning question posed by one dissenter set the tone for the questioning: "Are our kids that bad off, that we need a psychologist up here full-time?"

"I would say that your kids are no worse off than kids in Burlington or Milton, but your kids are different than when we were kids," answered Rich Reid, LSSU's first and current school psychologist. "I could give an hour lecture on how the world is a different place. AIDS. That word was only invented in the last ten years. Think back when we were kids. I didn't know anybody who was divorced back when I was a kid growing up. And clearly fifty percent of our kids [today] come from situations where their biological moms and dads, for whatever reason, are not there. I'm not saying that's good or bad. I'm saying it has an impact on these kids."

Reid and Hock, by virtue of their job descriptions, work closely together in meeting the special needs of students. Hock says their respective caseloads in terms of Morristown involves

potentially every kid in the school system, about one thousand students. The fact that Morristown is a school system that has a history of success in working with special education students has not been lost on the Vermont Department of Social Rehabilitation Services. According to Hock, state placements of special needs kids in Morristown is not a happenstance.

"I would say Morristown kids in general are probably as mentally healthy as anywhere else in the world," explained Hock. "But we're talking about kids here who have, it's a small percentage of the population, but who have very intense needs. And many of them are not kids who were raised in Morrisville. They're not products of Morrisville's upbringing. In fact, I think they've been brought here because this is a good place to grow up. I don't think there's something bad in the water that makes Morristown kids more prone to emotional-behavioral problems. It might be the opposite--that it is a good environment, so this has sort of become a town of choice for SRS, to try to get some pretty messed up kids straightened out. I like to think part of it's the school system. That we do have a good school system."

Reid arrived on the scene in the summer of 1989, about a year before Gov. Madeleine M. Kunin signed Act 230 into law. Act 230, which calls for changes in the way students with special learning problems are educated, is based on the premise that all schools must begin to pursue a comprehensive system of education services that will result, to the maximum extent possible, in all students succeeding in the regular classroom.

Act 230, designed to encourage schools to provide services for special needs kids for the purpose of precluding a need for special education, calls for each school district to:

-Strictly follow all state eligibility standards for special education.

-Provide services to all eligible children from the age of three.

-Make every possible effort to identify and serve children with disabilities in the early grades, and to provide appropriate services before more serious problems develop.

-Train the regular classroom teacher to teach children who have a wide variation in learning styles and different strengths and weaknesses.

-Make the greatest use of local resources, designed by the district in consultation with parents, for teaching students in the regular classroom.

Pursuant to the mandates of Act 230 the Morristown Board of School directors adopted an appropriate educational policy adhering to the above points. And for the 1992-93 school year, instructional support teams, made up of administrators, guidance counselors, and content area teachers, were established in response to Act 230. Reid has since become a primary member of those teams at both the elementary and secondary levels.

"Basically, our orientation there is to look at kids defined as at risk or who have fallen into that umbrella of Act 230 in any way," summarized Mahoney, referring to the Peoples Academy instructional support teams. "It could be as simplistic as a concern for a kid who doesn't seem to have any friends. Nobody links up with them. We try to provide ways to make that happen so it doesn't seem like it's a contrivance. It could be as

severe as we've got a kid who we believe is learning disabled and we need to do an evaluation. Then we tap into Rich as a psychologist to do that."

Obviously, in spite of the use of the word "instructional," the support teams are not involved strictly with academics. Team focus is frequently, if not constantly, overshadowed by the presence of issues involving family, peers, and growing up.

"When I first got here," recalled Reid, "we had guidance counselors who were delighted to see me because they were feeling, and they were right, that they were being asked to deal with situations for which they didn't have the training and that they didn't feel comfortable with. They thought maybe they would potentially do more harm than good."

Both Harrison and Rowe say that since the arrival of the school psychologist, the school can meet the needs of kids in a much more comprehensive way. Before the position came into being, a student in crisis was put on an outside agency's waiting list. Many times the wait was a month or longer. Responding to the crises of individuals also took the guidance staff away from programmatic tasks that had been designed to benefit large groups of students.

"It used to be that everything had to stop where there was a crisis," Harrison said. "If we were scheduled to be in classrooms that day working with all the seventh graders and a crisis came up, we weren't there. Having Rich in the building gives us the freedom to do our work that needs to be done with all kids instead of always dealing with crisis."

"That's been very valuable," echoed Rowe. "At least Rich can get to see the person and at least form a kind of evaluation as to what's needed for a youngster. He's been involved with both of us, with kids we are really concerned about being self-destructive. It isn't something that happens every day but it happens more frequently than you'd like to think."

Harrison said that in recent weeks they have seen suicidal notes written by students or they have heard from adults and other students about conversations they have had involving suicide. The only single connector, according to the guidance counselors, seems to be self-esteem.

"I guess I feel less stress knowing that I can pick up the phone and say, 'Can you see Mary. We're really concerned about her,' Rowe explained. "It seems as though that's been a really big help. In the last two weeks I've had two parents here really concerned about some things that were going on at home. I think in the past I would have tried to handle that. Now it's something that Rich could do."

The presence of a school psychologist as a resource for guidance has made it possible for the counselors to concentrate their efforts on more bona fide guidance services. But it does not mean that they are free of having to respond to crisis.

"Even with a school psychologist," Harrison remarked, "there's still an awful lot that spills over [into the guidance department]. There are still psychological issues related to abuse, alcoholism, early pregnancy, you name it. Meanwhile, we need to do all the academic and life planning kinds of things.

We need to do those large group things with all the kids. And lots of times we feel like that's the piece that we never have time to get to. Crisis always has to take precedence. The kid who's hurting in your office can't wait. So, if I'm supposed to be in seventh grade groups, I'm not there. That's the one thing that can wait, or has to wait."

A big reason a significant amount of guidance time is spent responding to crisis is because, fortunately, students are not afraid to ask for help when they need it themselves or when they feel intervention is necessary for a friend.

"It's really difficult to follow a schedule here," Rowe said. "We'll be set to see somebody third period and at the end of second period somebody walks in. There's a lot of self-referral. People who have done internships here and visited us tell us they were struck by the climate of this school where kids feel they can self-refer."

Reid says that students are not afraid to approach the guidance office because it is a well-established place. The support staff who call on Reid for assistance say the school psychologist's personality contributes to an atmosphere that encourages the seeking of help. Reid's style is to make friends with the kids he is working with. Hock refers to one aspect of Reid's approach as "trout stream counseling."

"He'll set up a behavior program for a kid and if a kid has a good week, on a Friday afternoon he'll take him fishing," Hock said. "It gets down to that level. Sometimes that's the best counseling we can do because the kid feels willing to talk. If

we didn't have a psychologist on staff none of that kind of thing would be possible."

Mahoney feels that students see Reid more as a doctor than as a school administrator from whom they'll receive a punishment. Students seem to rationalize that he's got the tools to help you get fixed up and he's going to be nonjudgmental about how that is done.

"A nice thing to have when a youngster loses it is a guy in the hall who's professionally trained to deal with that," Mahoney claimed. "And if the kid's really out of sorts, you can say, 'Look, how would you feel about talking to the school psychologist?' And sometimes because that person doesn't wear the hat of the authority figure, it's like okay and you've got a way to defuse an issue right here rather than drive someone to an emergency outpatient care center at the mental health facility. From my perspective as administration, that's what you gain from having someone in-house."

In other words, Reid is not an intimidating figure. That's why kids will follow through on self-referral, according to Angney. She has found that when students are out of control, they generally realize it and want help. They recognize Reid as a source for that help.

"Rich is a very, very well liked individual," the superintendent asserted. "He's seen by everybody I know as a real good guy and people like to be with him. He's used as a positive reinforcer with kids. They get to do things with Rich as a result of meeting some of their targeted goals. He's a very

compeling reinforcer for a number of students. They get to spend time with the school psychologist. It's a reward. And that's sort of special. I think a lot of it has to do with Rich's personality, but a lot of it has to do with Rich's training in personal abilities to work with kids."

In addition to having a person in-house to conduct special education assessments and assist guidance counselors in crisis response, the school psychologist, as an integral member of the instructional support teams, serves as an important link with outside agencies that can provide students with beneficial services.

"It's interesting," noted Angney. "Professional courtesy has resulted in a quicker response from [Lamoille County Mental Health] when it is the school psychologist that calls. Sometimes when a teacher calls it'll be a while before something can happen. Rich calls and it can happen sooner.

"The grants we have attempted to get have focussed on community agency interaction. We have better working relationships with SRS, with Mental Health, the Family Center, than before we had a school psychologist. It's putting a community team together that has the time, the interest, and the knowledge to collaborate around providing services for our students.

"Since we've had a school psychologist, we've come a long way in overcoming the barriers that confidentiality has put up. Those barriers hinder working relations because everybody's afraid that they're going to violate confidentiality. We've got

a commitment to see that it doesn't get in the way of providing services to kids, that we're respectful of confidentiality, and that we adhere to the law and the demands of confidentiality, but that we find ways to share information. Psychologist to psychologist is one way that information can be shared. That assists us in dealing with issues."

In grades 7-12 the tendency is for the school psychologist to work directly with students, either individually or in groups, and frequently on a long-term basis. The psychologist's role changes in the elementary school where it's much more likely that he will work with teachers and facilitate better relationships between teachers and parents. Consequently, this has resulted in responses to troubled students that are more appropriately designed to meet needs as opposed to averting future episodes by instilling in the student a fear of reprimand.

"[Before we had a psychologist] we tended to respond to kids who were acting out in more punitive ways and less supportive ways," recalled Thompson. "Our goal was to manage their unacceptable behavior. We didn't really have any feeling that we had a way to help support the youngster around whatever their issues were. Their issues were causing them to have extreme behavior and all we knew how to do was control their behavior. Not help the kid.

"I think the school psychologist has helped us form some good partnerships with families. Prior to his coming along we didn't do that. Nine times out of ten we were even in an adversarial kind of relationship, at least it often started that

way. The school psychologist has helped us all feel like we're after the same thing and helped us see how we all have a role in helping a kid instead of just controlling behavior."

When Susan Titterton became the elementary school guidance counselor full-time, Riki French became the school's full-time coordinator of instructional support services. Her previous six years as a Morristown Elementary employee were spent as a consulting teacher. It is her job to help classroom teachers find support in dealing with students who have learning or behavioral problems.

"The school psychologist helps train teachers to be preventive and to deal with the kinds of issues that kids come in with," she explained. "It's not that we need a school psychologist to give therapy to kids or their families. As a matter of fact, we don't usually use a school psychologist to do that. The school psychologist does work training the staff to effectively deal with a kid who has got behavior issues in a preventive way so that they either don't come up or that they help the kid figure out how to handle their own behavior. Teachers don't work in isolation anymore."

Again, the ways in which teachers respond to disruptive and inappropriate behaving students have taken on a much more positive approach with the assistance of a school psychologist. Their perceptions have expanded. They realize that students do not simply behave arbitrarily. The occurrence of such things as classroom disruptions and attention deficits usually suggests the presence of circumstances that produce stress. Knowledge and

awareness of these circumstances help instructors and support personnel get to the root of each problem.

"The school psychologist has expertise in learning theory," French added. "The amount of research about learning theories is tremendous. That knowledge makes a big difference in terms of people beginning to learn how to deal with kids who have behavior problems. It used to be that if a kid was a behavior problem it was because they were brats. But now we know there are real reasons why kids don't behave in school right. They may look like behavior problems on the surface but it's because the environment isn't set up to deal with some of those issues. The school psychologist helps a lot around those issues."

In terms of students with behavior management and special education needs, the in-house availability increases the integrity of program implementation since the psychologist is consistently available to evaluate progress and provide follow-up.

"It's such an advantage when he helps to write the evaluation and then is part of the team as the program is being written," Titterton said. "The way we used to use evaluators, they'd come in, do the testing and a little observation during the testing, write up the report, but they wouldn't write the plan for the testing and they wouldn't begin looking at the program afterwards. [The school psychologist] can work through the whole process. Those are big advantages. It helps us to do all the work better."

"Rich has got some credibility with people because they know he knows who they are and what their styles are," replied Thompson. "So, when he makes a recommendation it sounds realistic and doable to the person he's making it to because they have a relationship. The outside consultant comes in and makes a recommendation and sometimes it feels like he's just reached into his bag of tricks and pulled out the same one he's already delivered fifty times that day. When you have your own staff person helping people with this stuff it's totally different. If it doesn't work, Rich is here for someone to nail the next day. The consultant has gone off to their next place. They don't know whether it works or not."

"He has done small group kinds of things around anger management," French said of Reid's work with elementary students. "There are specific ways you can teach them how to control their anger, recognize it and control it so that they don't get themselves in trouble. And the other thing I think he does a lot of work with is with parents. I know that a number of times a parent will come in and there'll be an issue that relates to home. There's a school problem and there's a home problem. It sort of crosses over into both territories. Rich sometimes comes in and helps us figure the whole thing out. Sometimes we carry programs over into the home."

Traditionally, the week before school vacations, particularly winter and spring breaks, are characterized by manifestations of high stress for teachers as well as students. In anticipation of those breaks, Reid said, faculty and staff

tend to notice the stresses in their work and their lives, and problems might bubble up to the surface more frequently than would otherwise be the case. Reid noticed that the week before this past February vacation reached its usual fever pitch. However, there was a measure of control displayed by school personnel that he had not seen before.

"I was kind of sitting here and it occurred to me that I didn't have a lot of people running up to me and saying I cannot wait until this vacation comes," Reid recalled. "We weren't running around like chickens with our heads cut off, which the first year or two here tended to be what happened. Things haven't gotten better in terms of the kids' lives. We still have kids that have to deal with a lot of stuff that if it was an ideal world they wouldn't have to deal with, but I think we're dealing with it in a much more appropriate way. As a result we're not feeling like the world is crashing in on us and we're not getting all stressed out and we're ready for what comes our way. Clearly there are bumps in the road but I think we're taking the bumps pretty well. That was something that really struck me at the last vacation. To me it was a milestone that we've made some significant growth. We're not just putting out fires. We've got our plans in place and we're organized. We're confident that we're going to support each other and things tend to be working.

"It was a particularly troublesome week," Reid added about the week preceding this past February vacation. "We had some families who went through some really horrendous stuff and their

kids were bringing it to school as kids do. It was even worse than your typical week before vacation and we still did great."

French offered a theory about why pre-vacation weeks are prone to upheaval, at least from the students' perspectives. It appears to be rooted in the contemporary make up of families.

"I don't know if it's true, but it seems to make some sense," she said. "Kids begin to act out or get a little bit antsy around vacation time because their schedules are going to change. They're not quite sure where they're going, who's going to be taking care of them, or if they're going to be playing at home. For some of the kids we've identified as having these problems, I think because of Rich, we're beginning to make contact with family to let them know that they might want to let their child know what's going to happen to them during vacation. A lot of parents wouldn't even think there could be any anxiety about it."

"I think it's still a high stress time," confirmed Thompson of those critical weeks. "It isn't like it's any worse, but I don't think that goes away. It seems to me that we have been able to absorb or manage the stressors that come along with those times a little better. We don't end up having to kick kids out now and we used to. I think people used to go into vacation feeling defeated and ineffective. Now they go into vacation feeling totally bushed, but effective. It's not any less work, but we're getting something accomplished for the work. It used to be that it was a lot of work and you didn't end up anywhere ahead of the game for all that effort."

With the position of school psychologist firmly entrenched in the Morristown school system, and instructional and support personnel now so adept at using this resource to enhance instructional efficiency, it's hard to imagine any school without this type of in-house input. Ideally, in a K-12 system like Morristown's, one psychologist in the elementary school and one in the middle and high school should be the case. There would be enough work to do in each section to keep each psychologist busy full-time, and then some. But politically, the Morristown schools know they are fortunate to have a community that supports the one full-time position they will have beginning next fall. At the other extreme, to be without a school psychologist entirely in light of their positive experiences of the last four years would be unthinkable.

"It would be a major step backwards if that occurred," Thompson said. "We would have to give up some of the things that we're doing now for the kids, I think. We'd just say we can't do it anymore. It would sort of be like the capability of Copley's emergency room no longer being there and having to pack people up in an ambulance and take them to Burlington. It's sort of similar to that. If we can't do it here we've got to do it somewhere. It's our responsibility as a town."

School personnel do not take the continuation of the school psychologist for granted. They more than anyone understand the precarious nature of school budgets. Another slight unraveling of the community's economic fabric and the voters could slash the budget ruthlessly. As a result, who knows what a school board

would have to cut. Voters do not have a line item veto, but a board would be imprudent not to judge reductions on the basis of what the taxpayers identified as either essential or nonessential. In all likelihood, the school psychologist could be one of those budget items seen as expendable. Then the schools would return to procuring outside psychological services as needs dictated. However, the availability of those services would in turn dictate the degree to which the school would be effective in dealing with crises.

"In Vermont it's very difficult to get psychologists," explained Hock. "If one of the principals calls me right now and says he's got a kid on the roof, potentially going to commit suicide, we could get a hold of Rich immediately and have him intervene. If we didn't have a school psychologist that just wouldn't be an option. A lot of psychologists in private practice have waiting lists for a month or more. We couldn't ask kids to wait to have their crisis on the day the psychologist was going to be there. I'm just thinking what it would be like without Rich. There'd be so many things we just couldn't do. We probably could only use psychologists for consultation. It would be incredible."

By all accounts, the implication is that schools no longer have a choice about what student issues they can or cannot deal with. With or without a school psychologist, the issues will be there. With or without a school psychologist, the issues will have to be dealt with. Helping these students in one way or another will cost the taxpayers money.

"The dilemma is that most often youngsters that have need for these kinds of services," described Mahoney, "their parents don't have any kind of health insurance that will cover it. So what would happen in a hurry is we would probably go through that [budget for outside services] resource pretty quickly and sometimes with no hook up to the school. Often the only thing we would get back later is some sort of little report. There is not the feedback in which Bob can sit down with Rich. The immediacy of feedback is lost. The other thing I recall from our experience was we were putting a lot of money into those [outside service] contracts and we were going through it with very few kids."

The school psychologist is not a one-person cure-all or end-all for emotional, behavioral, or learning difficulties. A psychologist on staff does not eliminate crisis, but as part of a team he helps to increase the quality of the effort to extenuate problems before they explode and impede the learning of the entire class, before they burn out the teacher, and before they adversely shape the rest of the life of the student in question. Rich Reid best summarizes the current role of schools, teachers, and instructional support teams in contemporary society:

"I see an inherent problem in that, and I know this from experience, what happens is a belief sometimes that we can't impact on this kid because the home is so bad. This is a value laden judgment. Their home may not be like my home and your home, but sometimes many parents are doing the best they can given the resources they have. Frequently that's the case. I'd

like to believe that most parents aren't inherently evil and aren't destroying their kids. The problem arises when we at school start thinking, and I use the word 'we' in a broad sense, that we can't impact on this kid because of the home situation. In fact, it's the exact opposite. That's when we really need to turn the gas on. We know that when things aren't going that great for a kid at home, kids can distinguish between two environments. This can be their haven, where they're successful, where they're respected, where they're safe, where they're treated in a kind and caring way. That's got to be our impetus. I'm now involved in a situation where we can't get by that. The teachers just won't let go of the fact that the home is in just such disarray. I'm trying to get them to let go of that. Let's please, put this behind us. Let's concentrate on what we're doing and make this a great place for these students. Until we do that, it's not going to be."